Language in Motion

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Abstract

There are growing signs of a swing back towards linguistic puritanism, to the view that there are correct and incorrect ways of writing and speaking. Proponents of this view must, however, accommodate the rich variability that the language has shown over the centuries (much of which is of respectable pedigree). This paper describes some of that variability and then challenges a number of arguments for linguistic prescriptivism (the view that, despite linguistic variability, some usages are right and some wrong, come what may). The paper ends with an exploration of how writers can continue to embrace the goal of writing for maximal communicative efficiency while still accepting that change is inevitable, and even continuous.

> "The defence of the English language…has nothing to do with setting up a 'standard English' which must never be departed from [nor with] correct grammar and syntax, which are of no importance so long as one makes one's meaning clear…". George Orwell[1]

It would seem, from the staggering sales of Lynne Truss's post-post-modernist manifesto on punctuation, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*[2], that punctuation neurosis is widespread among English speakers. More than 1.6 million copies of the book have been sold, and no doubt many purchasers share Truss's belief—espoused with vacillating conviction—that the rules of punctuation are transcendental absolutes, epistemological neighbours of the axioms of mathematics and of Descartes' cogito.

The notion that there is a set of inviolable laws that govern, or should govern, the expression of the English language is widespread, and certainly not limited to punctuation. Grammar books, old and new, customarily label instances of prescribed usage as *correct* and instances of proscribed usage as *incorrect*; and newspapers still publish letters from readers fulminating over this or that linguistic trend (with the invariable lament over falling standards). No wonder internet discussion forums for writers are littered with anxious requests for help on aspects of *correct* usage.

In this paper I explore various aspects of language—in particular, its history and its purpose—in an attempt to show that the very concept of linguistic correctness is misplaced. While rules governing language usage are important, their importance has more to do with communicative efficacy than with any role they might conceivably have in contributing to a definition of the English language. In other words, such rules do not constitute necessary attributes of the English language, and thus it makes little sense to call any instantiation of them *correct* or breach of them *incorrect*. Accepting this will require a change of emphasis, and authority, when we seek to uncover the best way to write and the best words to use.

What is this correctness thing?

The first two definitions of *correct* (when used adjectivally) in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1973 edition) are:

- In accordance with an acknowledged standard , *esp.* of style or behaviour; proper.

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[1] "Politics and the English Language", by George Orwell, First published in *Horizon*, April 1946.
[2] London, Profile Books, 2003

▪ In accordance with fact, truth, or reason: right.

The strident, belittling tone one finds in Truss's monograph strongly suggests that it is the second definition of *correct* that she has in mind. If only we would use our *reason*, our rational cognitive capacities, we would see that "CD's For Sale" is quite simply incorrect. Plainly wrong. And this is not too far away from how correctness, as it is applied to language, is commonly used:

> "The notion of correctness assumes that there is one and only one proper way to write…"[3]

It is this particular idea of *correctness* that mostly drives the arguments presented in this paper, arguments that challenge Truss and her fellow sticklers. But we will also find, by argument's end, that even the first definition of *correct* might well be out of place in linguistic discussion. This is especially so if the so-called acknowledged standards proscribe language usage that is in fact doing its job, namely, communicating.

The flux at the heart of language

History is a good place from which to attack the authoritarianism that drives the obsession with linguistic correctness, for history shows that the English language we know today is vastly different to the English language of the past, and in many ways. Take, for instance, pronunciation. Sometimes it seems that, like tuberculosis and polio, the issue of correct pronunciation has become a concern of the past; but every so often an outraged purist manages to find a forum through which to infect the insecure with unnecessary worry. For instance, in letters to the editor we see ABC newsreaders chided for pronouncing *h* as *haitch* rather than *aitch*, and public figures mocked for taking five syllables to enunciate *temporarily*.

Behind these singular complaints is the more general one that standards of pronunciation (like everything else) are in decline, the implication being that some *earlier* standard was correct or more worthy of adoption. But the great unanswered question has always been *how far back do we go*?

Throughout the 1,500 or so years of the existence of a distinctly English language, standard or received pronunciation has been in flux. The fifteenth century saw what linguists call the Great Vowel Shift, a change that affected nearly all the long vowel sounds in the language.[4] For instance, *mood* gained its present pronunciation over *mode*, as did *house*, previously pronounced to rhyme with *loose*. In Chaucer's time, *wife* was pronounced *weef*; but by Shakespeare's time it had become *wayf*. In nineteenth century England, the accepted pronunciation of the words *off*, *cross*, *cloth* and *lost* was *orff*, *crors*, *clorth* and *lorst* respectively, pronunciations we certainly don't hear today.[5]

The overwhelming problem for purists is to show why we should adopt the standard applying at one time over the standard applying at another time? Why *wife* and not *whiff*, *wayf* or *weef*? Few purists even *try* to untie this Gordian knot.

And the same flux plays with spellings. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is difficult for the modern reader largely because spellings are now so different. Are we to say that Chaucer spelled incorrectly? Further, before the 16th century, *reign*, *island* and *debt* were spelled *rein*, *iland* and *det* respectively[6]. Were scholars in the 15th century poor spellers when they wrote *rein*, *iland* and *det*? Or are we now misspelling the words when we write *reign*, *island* and *debt*? Are

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[3] "How correct can you be" by Pam Peters, published in *Keyword*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1998, pp. 18–24. Passage quoted from page 18.

[4] See Robert Burchfield, *The English Language*, OUP, Oxford, 1985, p. 23f.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 41.

[6] See David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge,1987, pp. 214.

contemporary Australian and British writers misspelling *authorise* and *moralise* because Shakespeare wrote *authorize* and *moralize*? Or was Shakespeare a poor speller?

The meaning of words is likewise inconstant. The principal meaning of a significant slab of English words is no longer what it was centuries, and sometimes just decades, ago. Any dictionary compiled on historical principles (such as *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*) is fat with examples of semantic evolution. Take the word *villain*, for example. It once meant a low-born, base-minded rustic. Now it means an unprincipled or depraved scoundrel. Are we to say that the current meaning is correct and the earlier meaning incorrect? Or is it the other way round? Or consider *quibble*. It once meant to pun, or to play on words. It now means to evade the point with frivolous and trifling objections. In 50 years time when the principal meaning of *alternate* is alternative, will the purist still insist that that is incorrect? Will they still insist that *disinterested* really means objective and impartial when the overwhelming majority of people use it primarily to mean uninterested or bored?

And so it is with grammar. Consider, for example, the use of *their*, *them* and *they* with singular objects, as in *each person has a right to their own opinion* and *nobody took a jumper with them on the walk*. Purists rage against this practice, and yet it was fine enough for Shakespeare:

> "There's not a man I meet but doth salute me
> As if I were their well-acquainted friend".[7]

And it was fine enough for many other notable writers over the centuries: Philip Sydney, Henry Fielding, Thackeray, Ruskin and Phillip Larkin to name a few. Purists object to this usage because it supposedly falls foul of the principle of agreement, namely a singular name should take a singular verb, singular pronouns and singular possessive adjectives. What the purists fail to acknowledge is that English is littered with principles qualified by accepted exceptions: *i* before *e* except after *c* is one of the first we learn. Why purists allow some exceptions but not others is a mystery. But the main point to note is that the use of *their*, *them* and *they* with singular objects has a worthy pedigree. To call it incorrect is to accuse the likes of Shakespeare of grammatical ineptitude.

To be fair, some reputable writers have accused Shakespeare of grammatical ineptitude. The seventeenth century English poet, dramatist and critic, John Dryden, took exception to stranded prepositions. One common type of stranded preposition is where a preposition ends a sentence, as in "He asked which bus I was waiting *for*", which purists would prefer written as "He asked for which bus I was waiting". There are plenty of such constructions in Shakespeare[8], and Dryden—who is credited with originating the proscription against stranded prepositions— even rewrote sections of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* in his edition of the play.[9] Dryden's view—derived from an over-respect for Latin, in which there are no stranded prepositions—held sway for quite some time, and even some twentieth-century grammar book declare the stranding of prepositions ungrammatical. But Shakespeare was not alone in this practice. Many of the very best Elizabethan writers frequently stranded prepositions: Ben Johnson, Addison, Swift and Pope to name but a few. The great and often-quoted commentator on English language, H. W. Fowler, noted that:

> "Those who lay down the universal principle that final prepositions are 'inelegant' are
> unconsciously trying to deprive the English language of a valuable idiomatic resource, which

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[7] *A Comedy of Errors*, Act IV, Scene 3. This is but one of a number of such usages in Shakespeare's oeuvre, which suggests that it was quite deliberate and not a singular grammatical aberration.

[8] For example, "The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to". *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Act III, Scene I.

[9] For example, "What were you talking of?" became "What were you a talking?" in Dryden's edition.

has been used freely by all our greatest writers except those whose instinct for English idiom has been overpowered by notions of correctness derived from Latin standards."[10]

It is difficult to conceive that the greatest English writers could have got the language so wrong, and even more so when we consider how stilted and unidiomatic constructions that strictly follow this rule can sound, such as Winston Churchill's sardonic dismissal of it:

"This is a form of pedantry up with which I will no longer put".

And so now to capitalisation, which has also undergone great change. A little over 200 years ago, all nouns were capitalised (as they are in German). Nowadays it is mostly only proper nouns that are capitalised (and even this practice is weakening). Was the prior practice wrong and the current right? Or vice versa?

Let's end this quick survey of linguistic flux with a consideration of Truss's obsession: punctuation. Again, history rains on the purists' parade. Consider the following, a snippet of a facsimile edition of John Dryden's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*:[11]

Not free from tears, her heav'nly sire bespoke :
   "O King of Gods and Men ! whose awful hand
Disperses thunder on the seas and land,
Disposing all with absolute command ;
How could my pious son thy pow'r incense ?
Or what, alas ! is vanish'd Troy's offense ?

What are we to make of the spaces between characters and a colon, semi-colon, exclamation mark and question mark? This was no fad of Dryden's. It had a long history, stretching into the early 20th century. But no writer of repute does this nowadays. So, are contemporary writers right and Dryden wrong (not to mention John Stuart Mill, T. S. Eliot and most of their contemporaries)? Or is it the other way round?

The use of quotation marks is another case where historical variety is evident. Before Dryden's time numerous markers were used to denote spoken passages: line breaks, dashes, italics and parentheses to name a few.

The comma too has a limited history, coming to replace the virgule (the solidus, or forward slash) in the 1520s.[12] Are we correct to use commas these days? Or were the earlier writers incorrect when they used virgules?

The advent of the printing press introduced a significant change in punctuation practice. Before then, a good deal of pause-and-effect punctuation (such as commas) served to assist the reciter of text, with a concern for breathing, dramatic emphasis and the like. With printed works, punctuation switched more towards assisting the silent reader, serving more to indicate logical or structural elements in the text.[13] Was the former practice wrong and the current practice right? Or vice versa?

So as with pronunciation, spelling, meaning and grammar, the punctuation practices of writers of unquestionable greatness have varied across time. For Truss and her fellow sticklers to ridicule divergence from current orthodox practice is to assume that current orthodox practice is correct, and that those writers who punctuated differently got it wrong, despite their greatness.

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[10] *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* by H. W. Fowler, OUP, New York, 1965, 2nd. Ed., p.474

[11] *The Aeneid* by Virgil, translated by Dryden in 1697. A scan of the original publication can be found at http://oll.libertyfund.org

[12] David Crystal, *The Fight for English*, OUP, Oxford, 2006, p. 140.

[13] Those interested in the history of punctuation will find *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West* by M. B. Parkes a rewarding read. Published by University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993

Counter-arguments

Of course, the purists could stick to their guns and say greatness does not imply correctness, repeating that old adage from Horace that *even Homer nods*. In other words, Shakespeare, Dryden, Eliot *et alii* simply got the language wrong. Four arguments purists might advance to support their absolutism spring to mind. A particular usage is incorrect because it:

- is not supported etymologically

- is unnecessary

- is illogical

- obscures the meaning for the intended audience.

Let's consider these arguments in turn.

The argument from etymology is one of the purists' favourites. An example is the argument against the -ise spellings of *authorise*, *colonise* and the like. The argument goes that -ize is the correct ending because these words originate from Greek or Latin (where the corresponding ending is -izein and -izare respectively). Why the origin of a word should dictate its spelling is never explained (and would, if applied consistently, force us to change the spellings of a great many words in common English usage, not just those that now end in -ise). But the argument from etymology fails for a more fundamental reason: why must we stop at the Greek or Latin roots of a word? Greek and Latin did not spring forth *sui generis*. Both are derivatives of earlier languages (going back to what linguists call Proto-Indo-European[14]). Perhaps the roots of Classical Greek words ending with –izein had quite different endings. If history is to be the source of correctness, then we should go back not just to Greek or Latin, but to the precursors of Greek and Latin. The fact that we know so little about these precursors suggests that the argument from etymology is doomed.

Some grammar books still rail against the splitting of infinitives on the grounds that in Latin (on which much of English is derived), infinitives are one word and thus cannot be split. Again, why stop at Latin? Can we be certain that the practice of Latin strictly followed the practice of Latin's precursor? And even so: so what? English is English and Latin is Latin. They are so different that any yoking of one to the other carries no overwhelming logical force.[15] Moreover, this over-emphasis of the importance of Latin—the source too of Dryden's rejection of stranded prepositions, discussed above—overlooks the fact that much that is distinctly English is not derived from Latin at all. A good deal, for instance, is derived from the Germanic languages.

Consider next the argument that ties correctness to what is necessary. A contemporary example: purists rail against the apostrophe in "CD's" because it is unnecessary. It *is* unnecessary, but so too is much in accepted English. For example, the colon one usually sees at the end of a sentence stem that introduces a set-off list could be discarded without any loss of meaning. The comma before an embedded quotation and the capitalisation of proper nouns are further examples. An insistence that these practices are necessary even though they contribute nothing to the meaning of the words to which they are attached is at odds with the very purpose of language, namely, to convey meaning.

The argument that such-and-such a practice is incorrect because it is illogical is itself illogical. English, and no doubt every other natural language, is full of inconsistencies and illogicalities. Is it logical to exempt *i* from appearing before *e* if it follows *c*? Is it logical to

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[14] David Crystal, *Op. cit*, p. 296.

[15] "…split infinitives were used for centuries before they became the bête noire of nineteenth century grammarians." *The Cambridge Australian English Style Guide* by Pam Paters, Cambridge Uni. Press, Cambridge UK, 1995, p. 711

have so many silent letters in English words? Anyhow, what constitutes linguistic logic? It is obviously not like formal logic (which has *a priori*, axiomatic credentials). Perhaps it's nothing more than consistency. But then one has to ask why practice A logically needs to mirror practice B rather than practice B mirror practice A. Any argument that can settle that can't itself be based on consistency.

Correctness and communication: an unhappy marriage

Consider, finally, the argument that usage is incorrect if it obscures meaning. This would be too weak an argument for many purists, for it would allow novel usage providing only that meaning was not obscured. So signs like *CD's For Sale* painted on a shop window would, *pace* Truss, be acceptable, since the meaning is blatantly obvious even though the punctuation is currently unconventional.

But the argument from obscured meaning is of no use to the purist for a much more fundamental reason. Let's suppose that the English language continues to change, as it surely will. Now imagine that we humans discover an *elixir vitae* (or manage to engineer a lasting stimulation of our longevity genes) so that we can live for a very long time, long enough to witness *significant* changes in the language.[16] Suppose further that the changes are so significant that a long-lived purist in the distant future, writing according to the apparently inviolable laws of English that purists like Truss insist we now follow, is barely understood, if understood at all, by readers for whom the writing was intended. Could it rightly be said that our long-lived purist is, in this situation, a *good* writer? All the so-called fundamental rules of the language may have been followed and yet something essential is missing: the very thing that gives purpose to the act of writing, namely, communication.

Even more damning is the fact that, in the hands of a purist, the argument from obscured meaning leads to a contradiction. For the supposedly pure writing of our long-lived purist would, at the very same time, need to be both correct (because it followed the purist's inviolable rules) and incorrect (because its meaning is obscure to native speakers who encounter it).

Our argument can be reversed with equal effect. If someone writing in the future breaks all the rules in the purists' book and yet is understood perfectly well by all who read the words, would we say that that writer was a poor writer? I suspect not. As publisher Nicholas Hudson has remarked, if everyone understands what we say, then the way we say it cannot be incorrect.[17]

Truss's main argument appears to be this: "The reason to stand up for punctuation is that without it there is no reliable way of communicating meaning". This is a little stronger than the argument form obscured meaning, but it is in the same class. But note that the so-called necessity of punctuation doesn't imply that:

- the set of punctuation markers we now use must never change
- every punctuation marker we now use is necessary to impart meaning
- no marker is discretionary.

The markers we now use are quite arbitrary (and often quite unlike their predecessors). If we happened to use a caret (^) rather than a hyphen, meaning would be no more or less obscure. And as noted earlier, some conventional markers are unnecessary (such as the comma before an embedded quotation). And other markers are purely discretionary (such as our choice of

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[16] Conceivable advances in cryonics and medical science would serve our argument just as well.

[17] *Modern Australian Usage*, OUP, Melb., 1993, p. 98.

commas, parentheses, open en dashes or closed em dashes to demarcate a clause, which is more a matter of style than of meaning).

Moreover, there is nothing particularly special or especially advanced about our current punctuation system. It is, in part, just as idiosyncratic as our spellings. For instance, why do we demand an apostrophe in "The cat's ears are ginger" but not in "Its ears are ginger". This, and other, inconsistencies, the superfluousness of certain markers, the abundance of like markers, and the arbitrariness of the particular markers we do use together suggest that the current system of punctuation is neither necessary nor worthy of special respect.

Flux: does it imply linguistic anarchy?

The primary purpose of language is to communicate, and communication will only be effective if there is shared understanding between the initiator and the receiver. A writer, concerned to communicate as effectively as possible, will use words and other semantic devices (hyphens, commas etc.) that the expected reader will interpret in the way the writer intends. For example, a good writer writing today doesn't omit the hyphen in "suitable for small-business people" if they want to convey the message that the thing in question is suitable for people who operate small businesses rather than for people of short stature. In doing so, the writer assumes a shared understanding about the semantic significance of hyphens, assumes that the audience knows why hyphens are used in such contexts.

Now the wider that shared understanding is—both in the number of those who have it and in the number of rule-governed semantic devices—the more widespread and effective communication can be. And this suggests that having a widely promulgated body of rules governing language use is necessary for maximally effective communication. And isn't this just what Truss and her co-purists are on about?

Not quite. One must be careful not to cloud the distinction between what is useful and what is necessary. It is useful that all Australian motorists drive on the left side of the road, but it is not necessary. If we all drove on the right side of the road, there would be no more, and no less, chaos than there currently is. We don't say that it is *correct* or *right* to drive on the left side of the road. It is just a convention we have adopted because we needed one, and we've kept it because it works.

The same is true of the so-called rules of language. They too are mere conventions, many of which are particularly useful. But there is nothing *necessary* about them. Just as we could all drive on the right side of the road without the heavens falling in, we could substitute some other device for the hyphen—for example, "suitable for small^business people"—and, if our intended audience was aware of that particular usage of the caret, then communication would be no less effective than it is today with the use of the hyphen. We continue with the use of the hyphen because that is the current convention (and thus it expedites communication); likewise we continue to drive on the left side of the road because it is the current convention (and it expedites our ability to get from point A to point B). But there is nothing inviolable or absolute about these conventions, nothing that transcends the humdrum of human decision-making or blind conservatism.

While one doesn't see the caret standing in for a hyphen in contemporary English, one does see numerous unconventional constructions. Three examples: apostrophes in plural abbreviations (CD's); open hyphens marking the boundaries of parenthetical material; spaces around a solidus. But the fact that these usages are unconventional now doesn't make them incorrect. As the first part of this paper points out, much usage that current purists hold dear is relatively recent. At some stage in its evolution towards current acceptance, such usage would have been unconventional. For example, those writers who first omitted the space before a colon were, obviously, in the minority. By definition, their usage was then

unconventional. Yet it would be contradictory to say that this usage was incorrect then but correct now. Similarly, constructions like "CD's" might, in a decade or two, be conventional. But that doesn't make them correct now (nor incorrect): merely unconventional.

Flux and the technical writer

 Since the purpose of writing is to convey meaning, a good writer writes to be understood. Moreover, a good writer writes to be understood by most, if not all, of their likely audience. In most forms of communication, but especially so in technical communication, the audience wants to gain understanding as *quickly* as possible. The user of a computer system who reaches for the user guide part way through a task will not read it leisurely, as they might a novel. Rather, they will want to understand the instructions they need as quickly as possible so that they can get back to the main task at hand. Thus technical writers wishing to give their audience what they need will write in ways that convey meaning as quickly as possible; that is, they will choose language—vocabulary, punctuation, capitalisation and so on—that is *maximally familiar* to the intended audience (not language whose unusualness distracts the reader and sends them to a dictionary). And what is maximally familiar to a particular audience is, by definition, what that audience finds conventional.

But how do we establish what our audience is likely to find familiar and conventional? Most writers have a library of usage manuals that they delve into to discover or reconfirm some aspect of usage. And audience-centric usage manuals are certainly an important tool in any technical writer's kit. But the choice of manual is critical. If a writer's first obligation is to convey meaning (rather than to instantiate supposed inviolable laws), then they will be poorly served by the works of *prescriptivists* like Truss (for whom current usage is often derided irrespective of its communicative efficacy). Rather, they will do better consulting the publications of the *descriptivists*, those lexicographers and linguists who record, without judgement or exhortation, the current practices of English writers.

So where do writers go to discover the current practices of English writers? Amongst the precious prescriptivist junk that litters the shelves of bookshops, one can find exceptionally useful language guides written with a descriptivist bent. One example is *The Cambridge Australian English Style Guide* by Pam Peters[18]. But language can, and does, change quickly, threatening the long-term validity of the works of descriptivists if left unrevised. But writers do have other resources, often more up to date. For example, *Australian Style*, a free twice-yearly publication of the Macquarie Dictionary Research Centre, is a treasure trove of descriptive, non-judgemental information about contemporary Australian usage. Each issue carries the results of a survey of current usage, some of which indicate startling changes in Australian English (especially between age groups).[19] New Zealand writers might be interested in *NZ Word*s, a publication of similar nature issued annually by The New Zealand Dictionary Centre.[20]

Writers can also consult corpora. These are databases, often huge, of examples of current usage, taken from many sources. You can search through these databases looking for current usage, likely trends, regional variances, and the like. There are corpora covering US English, UK English, Australian English, NZ English, and no doubt most other variants of English. The following quote from the website of the British National Corpus sums up the purpose and usefulness of a language corpus:

> "The purpose of a language corpus is to provide language workers with evidence of how language is really used, evidence that can then be used to inform and substantiate individual

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18 Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1995.

19 For information about *Australian Style*, visit http://www.ling.mq.edu.au/centres/sc/articles.htm

20 Information and back issues can be found at http://www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/research/nzdc

theories about what words might or should mean. Traditional grammars and dictionaries tell us what a word ought to mean, but only experience can tell us what a word is used to mean. This is why dictionary publishers, grammar writers, language teachers, and developers of natural language processing software alike have been turning to corpus evidence as a means of extending and organizing that experience."[21]

To sum up: writers have ready access to the works of descriptive linguistics, and it is only when guided by such works will writers fully achieve the primary goal of writing: to communicate with maximum efficiency.[22] And adopting the principle of maximal familiarity in the choice of language not only maximises the effectiveness of communication; it also treats the reader with the respect that is their right. (Whose language is it, anyway?) And it might also, over time, eradicate the neurosis that suffocates would-be and novice writers whose exposure to the ranting of gerund-grinders infects them with an unhealthy obsession with correctness.

Two final challenges are worth considering:

- *But there are useful devices that are worth keeping, aren't there? Why shouldn't we fight to retain these rather than capitulate to the usage of the common man on the Clapham omnibus (which, in effect, is precisely the argument of this paper)?*

  Yes, there are devices that have proved to be particularly useful. For example, it's true that an en dash can be, and has been, an important semantic marker in expressions like "the Michelson–Morley experiment", giving a precise meaning (*two* experimenters) that is lost when a hyphen is used instead (which might suggest a single experimenter with a double-barrel surname). But to whom does it have a precise meaning? Only those who know this supposed convention *and* who have good reason to believe that the writer had also adopted it. But this convention is moribund, like many a convention of distant and not-so-distant generations. A usage is useful (and only then becomes a convention) when a critical mass of writers is adopting it. When that is not the case, the usage is of no practical use at all. Today, if your goal is communicate as effortlessly as possible, you would use neither an en dash nor a hyphen in expressions like "the Michelson–Morley experiment". Rather you would recast the sentence to make it clear to all readers—those familiar with the old convention and those who are not—that two experimenters were involved: "the experiment conducted by Michelson *and* Morley". If you continue using the en dash because it was once useful, you will most likely not be writing in a way that is maximally familiar to your audience, and thus not in a way that conveys meaning as effortlessly as possible.[23]

  This example is instructive for another reason. It was quite easy to recast the "Michelson–Morley" expression. Indeed, the English language is so rich in synonyms and so flexible of syntax that any one thought can always be expressed in several ways. This puts paid to the purist's lament that change is necessarily degradation, that if en dashes start losing their significance, or apostrophes start assuming unconventional responsibilities, or if *alternate* starts to mean *alternative*, then the language is poorer, that our ability to express what we may want to express is somehow diminished. On the contrary: there is sufficient fail-safe redundancy to cover such losses. Moreover, the inherent flexibility of the English language and the creativity of English speakers—which together generates that joyous

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[21] See http:// www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk *The Macquarie Corpus of Written Australian English* is a useful guide to current Australian English, just as *The Wellington Corpus of Written New Zealand English* is a useful guide to current New Zealand English. Many corpora, however, are not continuously updated.

[22] And this is wise advice for editors too, who should look upon themselves less as enforcers of laws and more as clarifiers or midwives of meaning.

[23] Of course, it does depend on your intended audience. You might well continue using the en dash in a document intended, say, for book editors.

flux that sticklers want to deny—is sure to quickly fill any vacuum created by a loss of communicative power: with neologisms, new idioms and new semantic markers that we may never have dreamt of (or even *dreamed* of).

- *But this is still capitulation. True, I probably should not, at present, use an en dash in "the Michelson–Morley experiment". But since this usage is especially useful (imparting meaning with great economy) why shouldn't we fight until it becomes conventional again. Why shouldn't we write to the newspapers, form language-appreciation societies, give talks, lobby education departments and politicians, and so on?*

  On this point I have no argument. If you feel that passionate about grammar, syntax, spelling, punctuation and the like, then do what you must (and I wish you better luck than the numerous reformers of the past who, despite the logic of their intent, have had absolutely no affect on current English language[24]). But this paper is not about how we night better communicate *in the future*. Rather, it is about how best we can communicate *now*, taking into account the incontrovertible fact that we communicate best when we respect the language skills and expectations of our intended audience.

Finally, consider again the quotation from George Orwell that opened this paper:

> "The defence of the English language…has nothing to do with setting up a 'standard English' which must never be departed from [nor with] correct grammar and syntax, which are of no importance so long as one makes one's meaning clear…".

At face value, this passage might appear contradictory. If the argument is that there is no correct grammar and syntax—the main point in this paper—what is there in the English language to defend? But Orwell was not defending the English language *per se*. Rather, he was defending the importance of language *as a means of communication*. He noted that the language of his day—and especially the political language—was lurching towards the vague and vacuous, full of dead and mixed metaphors, deliberately bloated and oftentimes just plain meaningless (as it is today). Imploring writers to follow strict laws of grammar and syntax cannot solve that. For Orwell, the solution lay elsewhere: a mixture of *approach* (start with the thought and find the word, not the other way round) and *style* (avoid jargon, foreignisms, passive voice, wordiness and so on).

And so it is with technical writing. If our aim is to give the seeker of practical knowledge what they are seeking, then we will write with clarity, economy and logic, using language that is familiar to them and avoiding devices and mannerisms that are likely to distract them. Our *approach* will be one of engagement and respect, our *style* one of immediate lucidity. Only then are we likely to achieve maximum communicative efficacy, a worthy goal even if we deny that there are binding laws of grammar, syntax, punctuation and the like, and one which we might never achieve if we were forced to shoe-horn our language into the unbreakable moulds favoured by the prescriptivists.

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[24] See, for instance, *Spelling Reform: A New Approach* by Harry Lindgren (Alpha, Sydney, 1969). While Lindgren merely proposed change, others have deliberately adopted new spelling in their works. A notable example is the Irish playwright and critic, George Bernard Shaw, who at some stage systematically omitted all apostrophes from his writing (except those that caused ambiguity). Despite the immense influence of Shaw in literary and cultural circles, his influence on spelling reform amounted to nothing; as did Dryden's attempt to rewrite Shakespeare, noted earlier. The irresistible force of linguistic mutation will always overwhelm the immovable logic of simplification and clear distinction. The impotence of the Académie Française—the body in France that attempts to regulate correct usage—proves the point.